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## **Hope on the Horizon: Recovery high school moves to new space, graduates nine**

- [Scott Girard | The Capital Times](#)

Horizon High School saves lives, its students say.

Shortly after staff celebrated the recovery high school's nine graduates last week, two of them told the Cap Times they were there because of the support the school offers.

"I don't want to be too gloomy, but it pretty much saved my life," Will Adams said. "I was in a very bad spot, was contemplating suicidal thoughts and this gave me another reason not to go through with it."

"If you knew the backstory of every single one of those students, the challenges and the things that they've had to face in their life, it really is a miracle," Horizon director Traci Goll said. "It really is, that they all graduated and got their credits and even showed up."

Just days before that celebration was another milestone, one that will help create a long-lasting imprint for the school on more students like Adams: Horizon moved to 659 N. Whitney Way, to a larger building better equipped to meet its students' needs.

Horizon opened in 2005 for students who had recently been in alcohol or drug treatment programs. It was the only such school in Dane County at the time, and remains the only one today, with about 12 to 15 students enrolled at any given time. It's now the only recovery

school in Wisconsin that Goll is aware of, and also allows students with mental health challenges to enroll.

“Why we're still standing is because Madison is an outstanding community,” said Goll, who has lived most of her life here and began working at Horizon about six months after it opened.

Key to its ongoing existence is financial support from the community. Construction company C.G. Schmidt donated all of the renovation costs for the new space, Horizon's sixth location, while the CUNA Mutual Group Foundation announced a \$32,000 grant to support increased mental health services.

Through a partnership with the Madison Metropolitan School District that began a decade ago, Horizon students who would otherwise attend an MMSD high school attend at no cost.

“They can do things that we can't do, which is what makes them highly effective,” said East High School social worker Pam Herman, who has referred students to Horizon. “They respond to kids literally 24 hours a day. They go above and beyond, and they respond to the entire family.”

Current and former students told the Cap Times that seeing that support makes them feel like the school, itself, is a family.

For some, multiple family members have found success through Horizon, with two siblings of former students among the recent graduates. Ken Adams, who graduated three years ago, looked on Thursday as staff praised his younger brother, Will, and handed him a diploma.

“I'm never going to stop talking about (the school). It's never going to be something that I can just be like, ‘Okay that part of my life is over,’”

Ken Adams said. "It's always going to be a very important and influential part of my life.

"I'm always going to be part of this family. I think it's important to keep going, and the new building, it's going to be very instrumental in that happening."

## Pride in graduation

The smiles of students and staff were evident, with or without masks, at Rennebohm Park on Thursday.

They and their supporters, family or otherwise, listened as staff spoke about each student, highlighting fun memories, challenges and skills. Bob Weinswig, the lead teacher, went first, talking about Will Adams and choking up at various points as he celebrated his accomplishments.

"Usually when we get these kids, they're not in the best shape and you're just thinking they're never going to make it," Weinswig said after the ceremony. "When they finally get to this point, it's amazing because you just feel like they're part of your family."

For Will Adams, one of the most important things about the school was that its staff "never give up on you," he said. Lily Arsenault, one of Will Adams' best friends and classmates, felt similarly.

"Honestly, I thought I was going to be dead; I was super suicidal so I really wasn't expecting to live past 16," she said. "And now I'm 18, I have my own baby and my own house. So it means so much to me to be graduating today."

Both were excited to have reached this point, but expressed some concern at what comes next, as they know they will miss an important group of people and part of their everyday support system.

“It's going to be a lot of hard work for me, I'm going to leave my entire family,” Arsenault said. “I've had these people text me at like midnight like, ‘Are you okay? Do you need help with anything?’ I've had these people constantly up my alley, here on my team always advocating for me.

“That is the best thing ever. I don't know any other school that would do this.”

## Dedicated staff

When Goll started at Horizon, it was supposed to be a six-month job until the school found a more permanent hire. Instead, 16 years later, she's found “it's fulfilled something in my life.”

“I've always been touched by it because it's not like anyone ever asked to be a drug addict or an alcoholic and I just think the stigma behind it is so bad,” Goll said. “People don't like to talk about it.”

About decade into her tenure, when she had surgery and was out of school for a few months, Weinswig stepped in. A former teacher who thought he was done with that profession, he accepted with no long-term plans.

Now he's five years into the job he describes as “exhausting” but “worth it.”

“You love working with kids, love that moment where you can get them excited and inspired about something,” Weinswig said.

“Whatever it is, you have to find that spark in each kid.”

Other staff include dual diagnosis counselor and teacher Kim Lohman, art teacher Erin Marklein, special education assistant Darby Buisker and office manager Suzanne Sweetnam. Goll said all of them are “always going 120%, over and above,” to help the students.

“The average kid comes in and has, we always call it the Swiss cheese education or transcript where they're missing something, because they've been hospitalized or they've been in rehab or they just didn't go to school,” Goll said. “So we have to catch them up, we've got to figure out what is going to motivate this kid, how can we educate this kid.”

Requirements for attendance at the school include 30 days of sobriety prior to enrollment and having an outside therapist.

“The number one criteria in order to come to Horizon is you have to want to be there,” Goll said.

## New space

The new building features plenty of upgrades over the old space, which Weinswig described as “like a one-room schoolhouse.”

Goll said there was “no privacy,” whether that was because of the single bathroom that had to be used regularly for drug testing or because it was more or less one big room and one tiny office.

“There was no place to really even breathe,” she said. “If something went wrong or haywire I'd literally have to take kids outside to walk; rain, snow, whatever, get them out of the building if they were having some sort of explosive tantrum or something.”

Now, there's a food pantry, and the new space provides more room to teach life skills like cooking and laundry.

“If someone comes to school and they're just filthy we can wash their clothes and that's huge,” Goll said. “In the past I've had to take kids to the laundromat or they would come to school with garbage bags full of clothes, ‘Can you please take this and clean it for me?’ And I've done it, we've all done it.”

Goll said the space and all of the people and organizations that made it possible are an example of the community's support for Horizon, which is something she wants to make sure the students are aware of.

“We truly care about these kids, and they should know that Madison has gone above and beyond... making sure our school stays open,” Goll said.

While she anticipates slightly expanding enrollment, it'll likely still be limited to make sure they can provide the support and care that are key to the approach.

“It's important, even if we only have 15 kids, those are 15 kids that would be on the streets using drugs, using alcohol, causing havoc or maybe just sitting at home completely depressed in a closet for months,” she said. “And because of Horizon, they have an opportunity to learn how to find out who they really are and become an important member of our community.”

Last Thursday was the culmination of what the school can do for students dealing with addiction and mental health problems.



Lily Arsenault smiles at her teacher, Bob Weinswig, as he speaks of her accomplishments during the Horizon High School graduation ceremony at Rennebohm Park on May 27.

- RUTHIE HAUGE



Simeon Newsome smiles as Horizon High School special education assistant, Darby Buisker, speaks of his accomplishments during the school's graduation ceremony.  
RUTHIE HAUGE





Horizon High School director, Traci Goll, welcomes students and their families to the school's graduation ceremony at Rennebohm Park on May 27.  
RUTHIE HAUGE



William Adams holds his grandmother, Jeanne Berigan, to keep her warm before the start of the Horizon High School graduation ceremony at Rennebohm Park in Madison.  
RUTHIE HAUGE



Lily Arsenault holds her daughter, Roszlynn Arsenault, while posing for a photograph with her classmate, Naomi Knowles.

RUTHIE HAUGE



Sydney Braem wipes away tears as Kim Lohman reads an excerpt from a children's book during the Horizon High School graduation ceremony at Rennebohm Park.  
RUTHIE HAUGE



Jazmine Willborn wears a decorated graduation cap during the Horizon High School graduation ceremony.

RUTHIE HAUGE